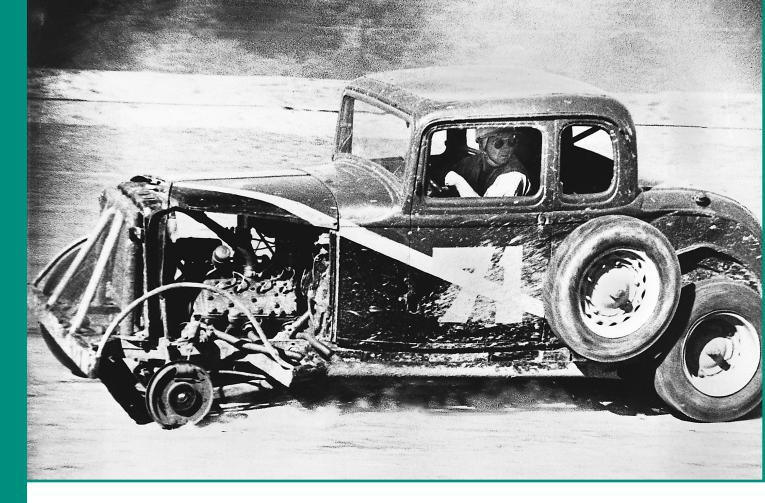




nother sellout crowd jams the stands. Over the loudspeaker come those famous words, "...start your engines!" The fans cheer, engines roar. Two by two, colorful cars plastered with advertising logos follow a pace car around the oval track, weaving in and out to warm their tires. After two parade laps, the green flag waves—and they're off!

As 43 cars jockey for position over the next three hours, the lead can change 20 times. Drivers intentionally bump one another as they fight their way to the front of the pack. Engines may blow up and cars collide or bounce off the wall, leaving other drivers to maneuver through smoke and flying car parts—all at an average speed of 160 miles per hour.

Welcome to America's fastest growing spectator sport—NASCAR—which claims 75 million fans coast to coast and more TV viewers than any sport except football.



HISTORY OF NASCAR

ASCAR traces its roots to the men who trafficked illegal "moonshine" whiskey in the American South of the 1930s and 40s. The moonshiners souped up their cars and honed their driving skills in order to outrun federal agents who pursued them. When drivers began to compete against one another on dirt tracks at fields or fairgrounds, the sport was called "stock" car racing, because the cars were improved-upon versions of the Chevys or Fords anyone could buy off the lot.

In those early days, stock car racing was loosely controlled by independent, often unscrupulous, promoters. "Sometimes you'd win the race, then have to beat the promoter to the back gate to be sure you got paid," recalled Junior Johnson, a former moonshine outlaw who later became one of NASCAR's greatest drivers.

One promoter, Bill France of Daytona Beach, Florida, was determined to bring order to the chaos. In 1948 he rallied a group of his colleagues and established the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR). Con-

vinced that fans would identify more closely with the sport if the cars resembled family sedans, France banned the highly modified cars that had become popular. To participate in his new Strictly Stock Division, cars had to be full-sized passenger models with hoods, fenders, bumpers, and grilles intact. The cars he sanctioned were so "stock," in fact, that early competitors drove the family to the track, raced the car, and drove back home.

In June 1949, 33 cars competed in NAS-CAR's first Strictly Stock race, a 150-mile event on the dirt track of North Carolina's Charlotte Speedway. Among the competitors that day was Sara Christian, the first female driver on the new NASCAR circuit, who finished in 14th place. France soon scrubbed the *Strictly Stock* name in favor of the classier *Grand National Division*. (This top rung of NASCAR competition is now known as the Nextel Cup.)

The first modern asphalt speedway opened near Darlington, South Carolina, in 1950. In September of that year, an astonishing 75 cars lined up on the new track for NASCAR's first 500-mile race, the Southern 500.

(above)

A driver turns to watch as his left front wheel flies off his car during a 1952 stock car race.

(opposite page)

Two drivers battle each other in the final lap of the 1959 stock car race at the Daytona International Speedway. The average speed during the 500-mile race was 135 miles per hour.

A NATIONAL PASSION

he phenomenal growth of NASCAR in the past 50 years can be attributed to three T's: tracks, tobacco, and television. Bill France launched a new era of racing when he opened the first of the super speedways at Daytona, Florida, in 1959. On its 3,600-foot straightaway and high-banked turns, cars could reach speeds of 200 miles per hour. The first Daytona 500 in February 1959 was such a close race that it took officials three days to declare a winner. A half century later, the Daytona 500 opens the NASCAR season every February and remains the most famous and most important race on the schedule.

The 1960s saw construction of a number of tracks that are still the heart of the NASCAR circuit today, but the crowning achievement was another Bill France speedway that opened at Talladega, Alabama, in 1969. At 2.66 miles and with 33-degree banked turns, it remains the largest, fastest, and scariest of all NASCAR tracks. When it opened, the top NASCAR drivers were so worried about safety that they boycotted the first race. After driver Bill Elliott logged a record-setting 212.8 mph lap during a qualifying session in 1987, NASCAR issued new rules requiring restrictor plates on carburetors to keep speeds under 200 mph. Elliott's record still stands.

In 1970 the R. J. Reynolds tobacco company, newly banned from advertising cigarettes on TV, decided to sponsor NASCAR's entire Grand National Series. In 1971, that series became known as the Winston Cup, named for Reynolds' most popular cigarette brand. That name remained until 2004, when Nextel Communications took over sponsorship and the series became the Nextel Cup.

R. J. Reynolds' sponsorship of the Winston Cup paved the way for legions of other corporations, including manufacturers of consumer products, to jump onto the NASCAR bandwagon. Sponsors such as Tide detergent and Kellogg's cereals helped lure women to the race track. With its new sponsorships, NASCAR also began appealing to well-heeled fans, and renovations at older tracks included sky boxes and VIP suites.

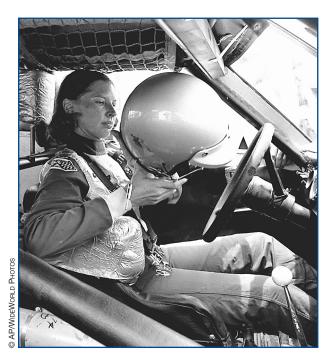
Another major boost for the sport came when television networks discovered NASCAR. In the first live broadcast of the entire Daytona 500 in 1979, viewers were mesmerized by a last-lap crash that led to a fist fight among several drivers. Such eventful finishes cemented the relationship between NASCAR and TV, which now broadcasts every Nextel Cup race and a number of NASCAR's minor league races as well.

Spurred by the growth of its television audience, NASCAR expanded beyond the South. In 1994, it invaded the hallowed Indianapolis Motor Speedway, the shrine of open-wheel racing that previously had hosted only one race a year—the Indianapolis 500 on Memorial Day weekend. Now an annual event, the Brickyard 400, so-called in honor of the Speedway's nickname, has become one of NASCAR's most popular races.

Currently, more than half of the 36 races on the Nextel schedule are held outside the southeast, in venues such as Arizona, California, Nevada, and New Hampshire. And more expansion may be in the works. There is talk of a major new speedway on Staten Island in New York City and possible races in the Pacific Northwest and Canada. Exhibition races already have been held in Japan, and in 2005, for the first time, NASCAR's junior league Busch Series will hold an official race in Mexico.

The face of NASCAR is changing as well. Throughout its history, the sport has been dominated by family dynasties, mostly from the South. The France family still





controls the operation, and some of today's leading drivers represent the second and third generation of Pettys and Earnhardts. But they are joined by a new breed of attractive, well-spoken, media-savvy young men, such as Jeff Gordon, Jimmie Johnson, and Kurt Busch, from places such as California, Nevada, and Wisconsin.

Even as new drivers achieve success, NASCAR remains a white man's sport. Only about 10 women have competed in its top division, and while Janet Guthrie logged five top ten finishes, no woman driver has achieved higher than fifh place. Likewise, few African-Americans have penetrated the sport. Wendell Scott, who came in first at Jacksonville, Florida, in 1963, still ranks as the only African-American to win a premier division NASCAR race.

Despite its limited participation NASCAR has wide appeal. It boasts plenty of action and dozens of fearless competitors. Fans can identify with the cars, which on the outside at least still look like Chevys and Fords, and with the drivers, who unlike stars of other major sports, remain remarkably accessible and accommodating. But NASCAR's true appeal may be more basic than that: As Humpy Wheeler, longtime manager of Charlotte Motor Speedway, said: "People like to see other people doing dangerous things, that's all there is to it."

(above left)

Janet Guthrie, the first woman to compete in a NASCAR super speedway race, prepares for a 1976 race at the Daytona Speedway. Guthrie retired from racing in 1979 and recently published an autobiography called *Janet Guthrie: A Life at Full Throttle.*

(above right)

A NASCAR pit crew services a car during the Brickyard 400 race.



In THE PITS

skilled pit crew is crucial to a driver's success. To be competitive, a crew should take no longer than 13 and a half seconds to change four tires and put in 22 gallons of fuel, said Steve Letarte, car chief and member of the pit crew for Jeff Gordon

Although there are 20 to 25 support people at the track on a race weekend, only seven actually work on the car during a pit stop: the jack man, two tire carriers, two tire changers, the gas man, and the catch can man, who catches excess fuel. "The jack man is like our quarterback," Letarte said. "It's up to him to determine when we're done, because when he drops the car, that's the signal for the driver to leave."

Pit crew members are first and foremost athletes. "It's a whole lot easier to take an athlete and train him to change a tire than to take a mechanic and train him to be an athlete," Letarte said. Because the crew's pay and job security depend on their performance during a race, they train constantly, working out to improve strength and conditioning, meeting with sports psychologists and dietitians, and studying videos of pit stops. Three days a week, they practice actual pit stops or parts of a stop, much as a baseball player takes batting practice.

The smallest error can be costly. "In a race last year, we had a mistake that cost us about six or seven positions and ultimately probably cost us the race," Letarte recalls. "When we dropped the right side of the car, the right rear tire landed on the hose connected to the tire changer's gun. I got it pulled out, but it took two or three seconds, and nowadays that's an eternity."



Jeff Gordon

A NASCAR HERO

zt age 33, Jeff Gordon already ranks among the greatest NASCAR drivers of all time. Named Winston Cup Rookie of the Year in 1993, he won the first of four national championships in 1995 at the age of 24. He also was the first driver in NASCAR history to top \$4 million and later \$6 million in earnings for a single season.

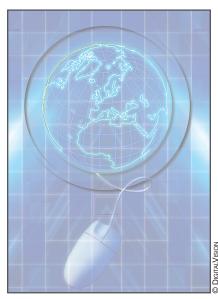
A native of Vallejo, California, Gordon started racing at age five. "My stepfather came home with quarter midget cars, one for me, one for my sister," he recalled. "She had no interest, but I was a little kid who would jump into anything." Gordon won his first race at age six.

Even though he grew up racing, he said: "I really didn't think of racing as a career until I graduated from high school. Now I have an entire business, I have employees, and everything revolves around racing. I never dreamed it was going to be like that."

Gordon has his own plane, and even during race season travels frequently to meet with corporate sponsors, sign autographs, do a photo shoot, or film a TV commercial. "My final destination will be the racetrack on Thursday in time for practice and qualifying on Friday and Saturday and the race on Sunday." He spends little time in the gym but gets his training on the track driving the car several days a week.

Even the off-season provides little down time. "January is my busiest month," Gordon said. "I start all my commitments, from an auto show for Chevrolet to a commercial for Tylenol or Pepsi, national sales meetings for [corporate sponsors] DuPont or Lowes, testing in Daytona and Las Vegas and California, and getting ready for the season by going to the shop and getting fitted for seats and cars and seeing what's new."

The danger of the sport is always in the back of a driver's mind, Gordon said. "I've been fortunate that I haven't had serious injuries, but I've certainly lost friends [in crashes] along the way. We do focus heavily on making the cars as safe as possible, but when I get in there, I'm so focused on the competition and the job at hand that I don't think about the danger. My only fear is not winning."



WEBSITES OF INTEREST

Official NASCAR Website

www.nascar.com

This website offers the latest news about drivers, races, and speedways, as well as the history and rules of stock car racing.

NASCAR Broadcast Channels

www.foxsports.com/nascar

http://sports.espn.go.com/rpm/index

These sites of the FOX and ESPN television channels, which broadcast NASCAR races, offer a wealth of news about races, results, and stand-

Sports Illustrated: NASCAR

http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/racing

Courtesy of Sports Illustrated magazine, this website provides NASCAR news, racing schedules, and feature stories on drivers.

Jeff Gordon

http://jeffgordon.com

Official website of NASCAR driver Jeff Gordon, Virtually all drivers have their own sites.

(above left)

Jeff Gordon poses with a patient during his 2002 tour of a new pediatric center.



THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF NASCAR

ASCAR tracks vary from a half mile to more than two and a half miles in length. Nextel Cup races range from 300 to 600 miles, though most are 400 or 500 miles. The cars themselves are "stock" in outward appearance only; inside they are marvels of automotive engineering.

The typical race weekend is a three-day event, with practices and qualifying rounds on Friday and Saturday and often a minor league race on Saturday as well. The qualifying sessions consist of several timed laps, and the drivers who log the fastest times start at the front of the line-up of cars for Sunday's race. The number one position, called the pole position, is the inside of the front row. The number two driver is beside him in the front row. The rest of the cars line up two by two according to their qualifying times.

Usually 43 cars participate in a Nextel Cup race. During the race, each driver is in constant radio communication with his pit crew and with spotters high up in the

stands who advise him of conditions on the track that he cannot see. Part of the strategy is determining when to come in for the six or seven pit stops needed to refuel and change tires, which deteriorate quickly from the heat generated by high speed driving. As much as possible, drivers pit under a yellow caution flag, which slows the race while an accident or debris is cleared from the track.

Drivers earn points according to where they finish in the race—180 points for the winner, 170 for the runner-up, and so on—and those points determine the drivers' standings in the contest for the championship.

(above)

Drivers speed along a 4-mile beach road course in Daytona Beach, Florida, during a 1953 stock car race.

(below

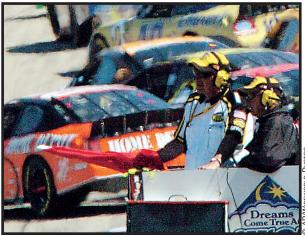
Tents and trailers of NASCAR fans occupy the infield at Darlington Raceway in South Carolina. A typical NASCAR weekend is a three-day event.



What Do Those Flags Mean?



GREEN FLAG—signals that the race is under way at the start of the first lap or the end of a caution period



RED FLAG—temporarily stops the race because of a severe accident or serious weather conditions



VELLOW FLAG—unsafe condition; drivers must reduce speed and fall in behind the pace car **WHITE FLAG**—start of the last lap



STRIPE—signals a lapped car to move over and let the race leaders pass.



BLACK FLAG—driver must leave the track and report to his pit stall because of a rules violation or unsafe mechanical problem



GUEGKERED FLAG—end of the race

LEGENDS OF NASCAR

The list of "greatest" stock car drivers is a long one, but three drivers deserve special mention.



Richard Petty (1937–)

The undisputed king of NASCAR, Petty won 200 races, more than twice as many as his nearest competitor, and seven national championships. President Ronald Reagan was among the fans on hand at Daytona on July 4, 1984 to cheer him to his 200th victory—the first time a current President

had attended a NASCAR race. The car Petty drove that day is now in the Smithsonian's Museum of American History. Always ready to sign an autograph or talk to the media, Petty is universally praised as NASCAR's goodwill ambassador.



Dale Earnhardt (1951–2001)

Believed by many to have been the best stock car driver ever, Earnhardt was nicknamed "the Intimidator" because of his aggressive driving style. He had already tied Richard Petty's record of seven national championships when he was killed in a tragic accident during the last lap of the 2001 Daytona 500. Legions of faithful

fans perpetuate his memory, and his son, Dale Jr., carries on his legacy as a winning NASCAR driver.



Glenn "Fireball" Roberts (1931–1964)

Widely recognized as the first superstar of NASCAR, whose popularity advanced the sport immeasurably, Roberts got his nickname not as a race driver but as a fastball pitcher for the University of Florida. He won 34 races—but never a championship—before he died of injuries received in a fiery

crash at Charlotte in 1964.

Racing Talk

backstretch – the straightaway on an oval track on the opposite side from the start/finish line (known as the **frontstretch**)

caution period – time of reduced speed after an accident or breakdown that requires racetrack cleanup; signaled by yellow flag

infield – the center of a racetrack surrounded by the racing surface; most NASCAR speedways sell infield tickets for spectators and campers on race weekends

just racin' – phrase often uttered by a driver who has fallen out of a race, loosely translated as "That's the way it goes."

lapped car – a car that is one lap behind and has been passed by the leaders

pace car – vehicle used to control the speed and formation of cars before the green flag at the beginning of a race and during any caution period

pit road – area with a stall for each team, where all refueling, tire changes, and other service during a race must take place

pole position – position at the start of the race reserved for the top qualifier; in stock car races, the pole position is the inside of the front row, and that driver is said to be "sitting on the pole."

qualifying – timed laps to determine the starting order for a race

tradin' paint – slang for cars making contact with each other during side-by-side speedway battles

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